

Charting the course

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Conflict And Confusion Of Cartography

There's a line that stretches from one corner of the world to the other and in between lies all of everything that ever was. This line, together with its infinite branches, often dubbed as a map, facilitates us in distributing places and locating them on earth. Howbeit, when the same line we use for guidance ends up becoming a vessel for Machiavellian manoeuvres – manipulate perceptions, assert territorial dominance, and manifest global power struggles, narratives warp fact, fiction triumphs, and ink blots write the course of history. Here's how.

Double double toil and trouble Err you will or turn to rubble

Since time immemorial, humanity has tried to put into words signs that cannot be explained. You name a place and find it mapped already. Howbeit, can human endeavours ever be devoid of errors? Not when these lines are drawn by victors, often drunk on territorial lust. The maps of the past, as a consequence, are strewn with sundry oversights. Take, for instance, the Viking christening of Iceland and Greenland. The former lacks the very ice it borrows its name from, while the latter is a winter wonderland. These blunderous endeavours are not only a product of their time but also end up defining our present. The 1920 case of The General Drafting Company is another example. The company, in an attempt to add an identifier to their maps to help detect plagiarism, invented (on paper) the town of Agloe, New York, at the intersection of two



Imaging: Deepak Sharma, GT Network

dirt roads. When the accused got caught, he evaded the charges, for, by then, someone had already built a dwelling there because people kept frequenting the place, expecting the said town. What was once fiction thus had taken real shape, all thanks to human ambition and maps.

Fillet of a fenny snake Friends and foes you too shall make

The very notion of a map exemplifies our self-preservation tendencies, but the truth is that there is no human tool that cannot be abused, and maps are no exception. For maps have now become proxy weapons for international conflicts, and further serve as

a tool for influencing opinion. The World Factbook states that 75% of the world's territories face ongoing international disputes over their borders. As in the case of Israel and Palestine, where zionism, a movement seeking a Jewish homeland, carved Palestine into two nations and birthed the long-standing, bloody conflict. Noted persons of interest also saw fit to cut up the African continent into a mosaic of polygons, because what is culture and nationalism when you have power and a pen? The Chinese expansionist attitudes that magically rename its neighbouring territories offer a similar insight, highlighting the nation's ambitions for worldwide dominance.

Eye of newt and toe of frog Borders blurring in the fog

By distorting size and centrality, maps have the “potential to affirm positions of power, trace certain global networks, and establish hierarchical relationships,” comments historian Nicole De Armendi. While our perception alters our interpretation of cartography, maps can also change the way we perceive the world around us. One such fundamental alteration was brought about by Gerardus Mercator in the 16th century. His Mercator Projection had a simple premise: wrap a piece of paper around a globe and then draw Europe at its centre. With the advent of far-accurate alternatives like satellite imaging and GPS, these maps have been rendered obsolete. In a classroom environment, the use of these maps is surely detrimental to education because of their misleading ratios. The map shows Greenland and Africa as the same size when the continent is fourteen times the size of the nation. Our preference for larger stimuli tends to warp the objective truth. Our psychological bias skews our sense of scale so that we intuitively relate size and significance. This, and the Eurocentric perspective of a map, inculcates biases as maps are often taken at face value.

Maps carry with them the impressions of the hands that make them, which is why it is up to the observer to detach the purpose from this map, as one distinguishes the art from the artist, though it is often done unsuccessfully. It is, however, paramount that one tries because a map without context is just an unresolved puzzle, spelling nothing but trouble.

THE GT POLL

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- a) Low paying job offers
- b) Increase in batch sizes
- c) Tech industry slowdown

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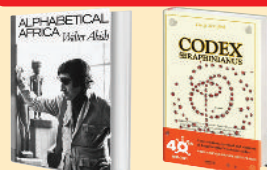
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Cracking the code
In conversation with Dr Amitabh Singh, a scholar and an academician, as he unlocks the secrets of the social systems.

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Classic oddities
Let's take a walk on the lanes of the literary world as we stumble upon various unusually strange books and attempt to decipher them.

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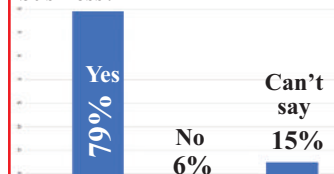
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Read about the arduous journey of The Bookshop Inc, a literal heaven for all bibliophiles, as they write a new chapter in their book.

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POLL RESULT

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